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Officials Chafing Under Criticism Arising From Iran Affair

Covert Actions Not Rampant, CIA Says

By JACK NELSON
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WASHINGTON—CIA officials, chafing because of suggestions that covert activities have lurched out of control during the Reagan Administration, say more than half of all the secret operations now under way actually began under President Jimmy Carter.

And, those officials contend, the Iran-*contra* scandal—one of the most controversial covert actions of recent years—developed because the White House National Security Council initiated the affair and bypassed CIA safeguards, not because the intelligence agency itself was out of control.

Attacks Seen as Unfair

"You know, everybody gets up on their high horse about this Administration kind of going berserk on covert actions," said one CIA official who defended the agency against what he and other sources see as unfair and potentially damaging attacks in the wake of the Iran-contra scandal.

More than half of all active "findings"—written presidential authorizations for covert activities—were "assigned in the last Administration," said the official, who spoke on condition that he not be named.

In fact, Deputy CIA Director Robert M. Gates was prepared to make that point in testimony to the Senate Intelligence Committee until he decided to withdraw as Reagan's nominee to succeed William J. Casey as CIA director, the CIA sources said. Gates withdrew rather than face a protracted confirmation fight that he said might damage the CIA.

Stansfield Turner, Carter's CIA director, branded the assertion that more than half of current covert actions were approved by Carter as "balderdash."

The Reagan Administration, Turner said, has vastly increased the number of serious covert actions. He pointed out that Congress requires the CIA to obtain presidential findings before providing information to foreign intelligence officers, no matter how innocuous the activity might be.

"So there's always on the books a substantial number of rather inconsequential findings," Turner said. "I can think of only one or two consequential findings from the Carter days that would still be on the books. The idea that the Reagan Administration has not vastly multiplied the consequential—but in my opinion ill-advised—findings is totally misleading."

Turner said that all Carter-approved covert actions would meet the test President Reagan laid down in his address to the nation last week. Reagan said he had directed that future covert activities support clear policy objectives and comply with American values, so that "if Americans saw it on the front page of their newspaper, they'd say: 'That makes sense.'"

The same cannot be said, Turner added, of the covert activities at the heart of the sale of weapons to Iran and the diversion of profits to Nicaragua's rebels.

The current CIA official interviewed by The Times, although refusing to disclose how many covert projects are under way, said that the agency is "keeping busy" with them. Only "a handful" of the covert actions initiated by Carter has been discontinued, he said.

Cooperating With Probes

The CIA, he said, is going all-out to cooperate with Lawrence E. Walsh, the court-appointed independent counsel who is investigating the Iran-contra affair for possible criminality. With special House and Senate committees also delving into the affair, the CIA official said, requests for documents are "coming from everybody. But the special counsel has asked for a lot of stuff, and we want to be perfectly cooperative with them, we don't want anybody to have the slightest feeling that we're holding one piece of paper back. We're trying to ante up everything they ask for."

Deputy CIA Director Gates, although refusing to comment on the agency's covert activities in an interview, emphatically denied suggestions by some critics that CIA staff members who helped draft Casey's testimony before the Senate Intelligence Committee on Nov. 21 "were somehow involved in some kind of cover-up."

The CIA had a lot of problems getting the basic facts together for Casey's initial testimony, Gates said. He added that the director's testimony was incomplete—but not intentionally misleading—even though Casey gave directions to get all the facts out.

To Stay as Deputy

Gates said also that the agency is looking forward to the Senate confirmation of FBI Director William H. Webster as the new CIA director. He said he has conferred with Webster and has agreed to remain as deputy director.

Although Gates conceded his disappointment at feeling compelled to withdraw his own nomination, he said: "We feel very fortunate that Bill Webster was selected. A lot of us know him and have worked with him, have very high respect for him and hope he's with us a long time."

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